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The Value of International Experiences for Business Students: Measuring Business Student Attitudes toward Study Abroad

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Abstract

The value of an international experience—especially for students of business—continues to be an area of focus at colleges and universities. Students across all disciplines within the business curriculum: accounting, economics, finance, management, marketing, or sport management are expected by employers to possess knowledge of, and appreciation for, other cultures. Using as a backdrop two unique study abroad programs that immerse students into an intercultural business experience and have them interacting with—and learning from—the local residents as well, the survey research in this study measures student attitudes before and after they study abroad and it notes the changes that students report in their personal and professional knowledge, skills, and abilities. The findings of this research can reshape the way in which colleges and universities market these important international experiences. Through this research, we found that factors that prohibit students from studying abroad have more to do with individual social anxiety (i.e. doing something without their friends) than anxiety based on intercultural factors (i.e. language, culture, and distance from home)

Keywords: international experience, study abroad, intercultural communication, business experience

The experience of studying abroad, with its new setting, new culture, new classmates and professors, new activities, and new travel experiences—takes students outside of their comfort zone. This unique experience exposes students to opportunities to improve interpersonal and communication skills, increased sensitivity towards other cultures and understanding of one's own, and has shown to increase adaptability, assertiveness, self-confidence and independence (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004).

While existing literature stresses the importance of including an international experience as part of a business student's program of study, very little focus is given to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are developed by students when studying abroad. Therefore, it is the intent of this paper to add to the literature by addressing the perceptions of undergraduate business students towards their study abroad experiences.

Chieffo and Griffith's (2004) find that study abroad students report developing a greater appreciation for the arts, those abroad are more disposed to communicating in a foreign language,

and they consider themselves more patient with people who do not speak English well. Chieffo (2004) conclude that short-term programs, even as short as one month, are worthwhile educational endeavors and students report significant impact in their intellectual and personal lives as a result of study abroad.

At a private, Catholic University, we measured the values reported by students when a study abroad experience is truncated. Students were asked to submit attitude surveys both prior to and after their participation in a short-term study abroad experience in Ireland (2 weeks), Luxembourg (3 weeks) and Rome (5 weeks). Responses to these surveys showed that for some students of Irish heritage, the experience in Ireland satisfies a longing to feel more connected to their background, and the culture of their parents, grandparents, or relatives. In Luxembourg and Rome, students may look to expand on previous knowledge of French, German, or Italian languages or cultures. For others, these short-term experiences are an opportunity to learn about a culture to which they have had no previous exposure. Study abroad is also perceived as a benefit to students in reaching their professional goals. Students often utilize the experience to illustrate to employers that they have the qualities the employer is seeking: the ability to go outside one's comfort zone, strong interpersonal skills, initiative, adaptability, and appreciation of diversity to name a few.

'Comfort' is the foundational construct for our research. Discomfort, or perceived discomfort, with challenges associated with studying abroad may serve as an obstacle preventing students from participating in a study abroad experience. Pre-test and Post-tests show that levels of discomfort are higher in students who choose not to study abroad, and lower in students who have studied abroad. We evaluate the post-test results from students who study abroad regarding changes in the actual challenges related to study abroad compared to the challenges that students perceive before the study abroad experience. In identifying these changes, we may be able to more intentionally address reasons why students choose not to study abroad.

The purpose of the study is to provide empirical data whereby institutions of higher education can effectively identify and address origins of student discomfort and realize greater student participation in studying or working in different countries and cultures, thereby resulting in students who graduate with more marketable knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs).

Literature Review

A review of the literature specifically pertaining to business student's attitudes towards study abroad experiences produced very few relevant titles. Most of the literature addressed topics such as the importance of including an international experience as part of a business student's program of study instead of the perceptions of business students relative to their international experiences.

Toncar, Reid, and Anderson (2006) illustrate the scarcity of research relating to business students perceptions of study abroad experiences. Their research compares perceptions and preferences of both business students and non-business majors, and their results indicate "business students appear more pragmatic than their non-business counterparts, expressing greater concern for financial issues, and the effect of study abroad on both graduation dates and future job prospects" (61-80). The literature review process identified articles dealing with study abroad experiences, such as motivation to study abroad, mobility of students, and internationalization of higher education. However, analysis showed that the vast majority of articles on study abroad experiences do not address the topic of student perceptions of their study abroad experiences, especially when narrowing the analysis to students who are business majors. Evans, Finch, Toncar and Reid (2008)

mention that they “have fairly clear preferences and concerns with regard to short study tours. However, small colleges and universities, schools with severe budget limitations or who serve relatively less affluent markets, as well as schools whose students are less cosmopolitan, may need to give greater consideration to the student as customer, and develop study tours that, to some extent satisfy the needs and desires of these customers while still meeting specific educational objectives” (16). Study abroad opportunities, especially for business students, are widely available. Furthermore, at some business schools, study abroad opportunities are built into the curriculum. Balkin (2003) states that

“travel abroad is especially important for Americans; we have it drilled into us early that the best of everything is rightfully ours. We think big, dream big, are big. We are even endowed with the right to pursue happiness—what a concept; try finding a feeling of entitlement to happiness engrained in the citizenry anywhere else in the world.” (4)

Methodology

We conducted our study at a residential private Catholic university in the northeast, with students who participated in two unique study abroad experiences in Luxembourg and Ireland. At the John F. Welch College of Business at Sacred Heart University, the importance of international experiences is emphasized through waived tuition for business students who take courses at one of three international locations: Dingle, Ireland; Luxembourg City, Luxembourg and Rome, Italy.

Surveys were distributed to a sample of 193 students. Included in this number were a randomly selected control group of 117 students who were not studying abroad, 34 of whom had previously studied abroad. These non-study abroad students served as the control group. Surveys were also given to a group of 95 students who were chosen to study abroad over the summer of 2012 in one of the aforementioned short-term programs. Both groups of students were asked to complete a post-test in June, following the short-term abroad programs. Surveys will continue to be collected through the Fall of 2012. To avoid bias, students who were to participate in the study abroad program were asked to fill out the survey *after* acceptance, so they were not under any pressure to answer in a certain way as though their answers were linked to their successful acceptance into the program.

The survey was divided into 5 parts (see Appendix A). Part A of the survey looked to measure student comfort with participation in varying levels of intercultural immersion, with the two dependent variables being familiarity with the native language (English/non-English), and whether or not the immersion took place along with a group of known individuals (friends) or not. Part B looked to identify perceived challenges of study abroad by ranking four aspects of study abroad from 1 (least challenging) to 4 (most challenging). Each number could only be used once. Parts C and D looked to measure motivation to partake in activities associated with abroad experiences. Part C asked students to rate items on a Likert Scale from 1-5 based on their desire to participate. Part D asked students to rank 7 reasons to study abroad in order of perceived importance. Each number could only be used once. Part E looked to assess student tolerance toward interacting with individuals from different cultures by presenting two scenarios depicting interactions with individuals from foreign cultures in familiar settings.

All items were compared across a number of different tests: comparing means, Standard Univariate ANOVA F Test (Repeated Measures test), One-Way ANOVA, Mann-Whitney U test, and Kruskal-Wallis test for ranked data where applicable.

In addition, researchers had conversations with each of the students throughout the study abroad process, from information sessions and the application phase, through the international experience itself, and after the post-test. These conversations took place in the following formats:

- Informal interactions designed to identify themes or common challenges shared by the participants
- In-class discussions on the value of studying abroad
- Formal pre-departure orientation for students studying abroad
- Formal follow-up seminars following study abroad courses

Comments made during these conversations were logged but not coded, and the data was analyzed to detect trends. These findings were used to aid and identify categories of challenges when studying abroad.

Results

Pre-test data results showed slight but consistent variation between answers from those students who had previously studied abroad when compared to those who had not. This variation suggests that students with study abroad experience report measurable differences in their values, and retain a perspective that is more comfortable with experiences outside of their home country. The following information outlines those values and perspectives.

For each part of the survey below, we will break down the results of the tests we ran on each item, as well as provide a narrative interpreting the implications of our findings.

Part A – Comfort participating; Language and friends

“The trip has really put a new perspective on life for me and allowed me to appreciate another culture. I am sad that the trip is winding down, but I am so happy with the friendships that I made on this trip. The people I have met here are truly wonderful and I think they have positively impacted my experience here.”

In part A, we looked to measure any increase in comfort level when considering study abroad. Students report that the two variables that cause the most discomfort were being unfamiliar with the native language and being unfamiliar with the other people in the group. Students were asked to rate their prospective level of comfort on a Likert scale from 1 (very uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable) on four possible study abroad scenarios, involving the variables of native language and the presence of friends:

- 1) You are sent to a foreign country where English *is* the native language. You do not know the other members in your group.
- 2) You are sent along with some friends to a foreign country where English *is* the native language.
- 3) You are sent to a foreign country where English *is not* the native language. You do not know the other members in your group.
- 4) You are sent along with friends to a foreign country where English *is not* the native language.

Results showed significant difference in responses between students who had studied abroad vs. those who had not studied abroad for the item “You are sent along with friends to a foreign country where English *is not* the native language,” with a p-value of 0.014 ($p < 0.05$).

In addition, one clear pattern did emerge for both groups, and was consistent across all four items (see Figure 1). Student prospective comfort levels depend more on the presence of friends than on familiarity with the native language. Students report that they would be *most* comfortable travelling to a country where English is the native language, followed by a country where English is *not* the native language, as long as they are travelling with friends. In fact, students would rather travel to a non-English speaking country with friends than an English speaking country with a group of students who they do not know.

Pre Test (Mean averages for all respondents n = 193)

- 4.83 – Foreign Country, English speaking; with Friends
- 3.88 – Foreign Country, Non-English speaking; with Friends
- 3.71 – Foreign Country, English speaking; no Friends in group
- 2.41 – Foreign Country, Non-English speaking, no Friends in group

Post Test (Mean averages for experimental group n = 31)

- 4.90 – Foreign Country, English speaking; with Friends
- 4.40 – Foreign Country, Non-English speaking; with Friends
- 3.90 – Foreign Country, English speaking; no Friends in group
- 2.85 – Foreign Country, Non-English speaking, no Friends in group

Figure 1

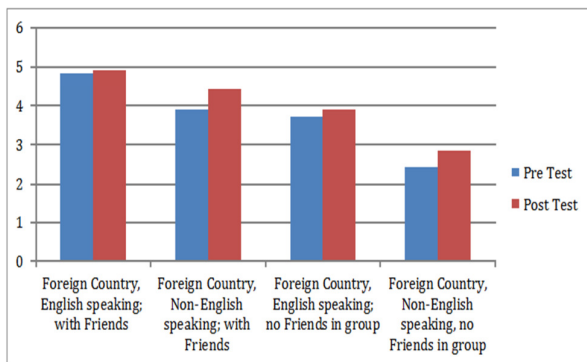
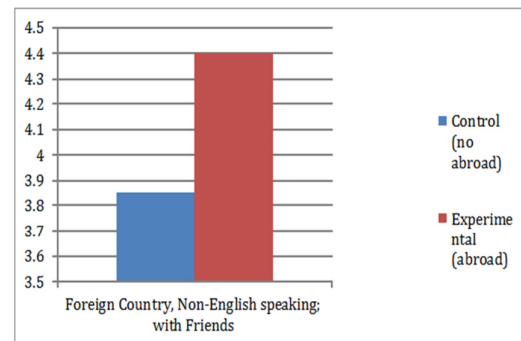


Figure 1 a



In the post-test there is a slight rise in the mean average for each of the four items after students have studied abroad, suggesting that students who have studied abroad gain a bit more comfort with the prospect of navigating an unfamiliar native language after an international experience.

However, the graph shows that the independent variable that correlates with student comfort is the presence of friends, not familiarity with language. With this knowledge, administrators may choose to focus on the notion of “bringing friends” and “making friends,” which are likely similar in the minds of the students. As one colleague suggested, perhaps a study abroad campaign with posters that say, “You don’t leave your friends....you just make more for them to enjoy”. For more information on student perceptions of meeting/making friends in an international experience, see item D5 in the survey instrument. Figure 1a shows a comparison of post-test results between students who did not study abroad (control) and students who had (experimental) for the survey item “You are sent along with friends to a foreign country where English *is not* the native language.”

Part B – Identifying perceived challenges of study abroad

“I met so many people here and the only problem I didn’t like was it was hard for me to get in touch with my parents. I couldn’t call them and I wish I was able to.”

When speaking to students about study abroad, four common challenges emerged. These were (i) the expenses related to studying abroad, (ii) living in another culture, (iii) living away from friends and family, (iv) and taking a college course. Students were asked to rank these challenges in order from least challenging to most challenging. This was not a forced ranking, meaning students had to compare these prospective challenges and rank them in relation to each other.

Expenses – No significant dependent variables in this study were linked to students who found expenses to be the most challenging. One consistency to note is that students who have studied abroad rank this challenge slightly higher after their experience than before. It should be noted that, as a mean average, expenses were ranked as the most challenging aspect of study abroad by both the control and experimental groups.

Living in another culture, Being away from friends and family – No significant dependent variables in this study were linked to students who found these items to be the most challenging. There was a slight decrease in the mean average rank for both of these items among students who had studied abroad, indicating that the experience had provided the students with the necessary skills to face the perceived challenges.

Course material – No significant dependent variables in this study were linked to students who found this item to be the most challenging. There was a slight increase in mean average rank for this item among students who had studied abroad. This indicates that the courses which students took while abroad were more challenging than they perceived before the international experience. This information may be helpful to administrators when preparing students to have appropriate expectations of the academic rigor involved with studying abroad.

Part C – Desire to participate in opportunities

“Learning business in Europe sparked an interest to perhaps completing my MBA in Luxembourg and, who knows, possibly finding a job in Europe...I did not know anything about the country prior to traveling and I am so happy that I picked Luxembourg to study abroad!”

Students were asked to rank, on a Likert scale from 1 being *no desire* to 5 being *a great desire*, their level of desire to participate in seven different activities of study abroad. These included:

- 1) Learn a foreign Language
- 2) Travel to non-English speaking countries
- 3) Hold a job that includes travel to other countries
- 4) Hold a job in another country
- 5) Take courses with an international focus
- 6) Read or research history of other cultures
- 7) Discover new things about myself

The mean average for each item increased after the abroad experience, with the largest observed increase on item C4, “Hold a job in another country,” ($p = .005$) and item C5, “Take courses with an international focus.” ($p = .008$). All items were put through a one-way ANOVA

test, and significant results were found for these two items ($p < 0.05$). The smallest observed increase was on item C7, “Discover new things about myself”, but it was also the highest ranked item in Part C, in both the pre-test (mean of 4.598) and the post-test (mean of 4.737). The change in students’ desires to hold a job in another country or take courses with an international focus suggests that students develop interest in expanding their future plans to include global or international opportunities. After studying abroad, students develop desires to immerse themselves in international, intercultural experiences both at the academic level, by taking courses with an international focus, and at the professional practice level, for example, holding a job in another country.

Part D – Reasons to study abroad

“The experience here was unforgettable since I have never been to Ireland before and quite frankly, I would love to stay here longer. It’s a beautiful country, the people are amazing, and the experience was priceless!”

In Part D, students were shown a list of seven different reasons a person may have for studying abroad. The reasons were developed through conversations with over 100 study abroad applicants over the past two years. Students were asked to rank the order of importance for each item, with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important reason to study abroad.

Item D1, “employers value it” was a more important factor before students participated in study abroad (mean 4.23), and became less important after they studied abroad (mean 5.0). A Mann-Witney test, which assesses whether one of two samples of independent observations tends to have larger values than the other, found a significant $P(1)$ value of 0.0495. In other words, while “employers value it” was listed as the sixth most important reason to study abroad in both pre- and post-test results (the rank did not change), the amount which the individual item varied after the study abroad experience was shown to be significant for individual students.

Item D5, “To meet people” was less important before students participated in study abroad (mean 3.65), but became more important after they studied abroad (mean 2.9). Before studying abroad, students ranked this item third-most important, and upon returning from study abroad, students ranked this item the most important among the seven items. A Mann-Whitney test found a $P(1)$ value of 0.0132, and a $P(2)$ value of 0.0264. We confirmed this result by running a Kruskal-Wallis test, and found this item to have a P value of 0.021.

These findings suggest that students who are interested in studying abroad, but have not yet done so, do not realize how much bonding and personal satisfaction and interaction takes place. After the study abroad experience, students feel they have made a group of new friends with whom they have shared experiences, and they feel these people to be close friends. When students are looking to study abroad their perception is that they have already met their “close friends” and they are no longer looking to do so.

However, it is not until they return from the study abroad experience that students reflect and realize, perhaps for the first time, that making friends is a lifelong process, and they view study abroad with more value as personal and social development, and have less concern about whether or not the experience will help them transition into a job after college.

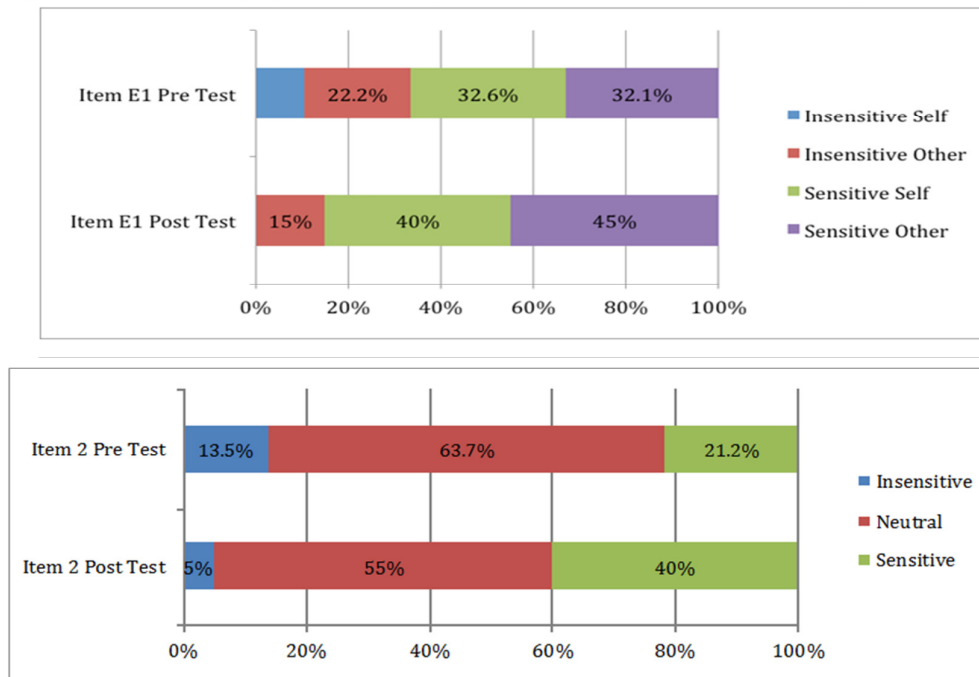
Part E – Assessing development of intercultural tolerance

“Overall this was an amazing experience. I enjoyed everything on this trip. The biggest thing I noticed and liked was the difference in people in this culture. It’s amazing how different it is from back home. The locals I met are some of the nicest people in the world. They are so welcoming and nice to us.”

In Part E, students in both groups were shown two scenarios and asked to choose between two possible responses. The first scenario, item E1, involves the respondent being in line at an event. The line is being held up because the person attempting to buy a ticket does not speak English. The second scenario, item E2, asks how the student would react on the first day of a college class if he/she could not understand a professor’s thick foreign accent.

Responses for item E1 were coded as Insensitive Self, Insensitive Other, Sensitive Self, and Sensitive Other. *Insensitive Self* refers to an answer that shows insensitivity toward the situation, with a focus on the self: “You wonder why you always get stuck in lines behind people like this.” *Insensitive Other* refers to an answer that shows insensitivity toward the situation, with a focus on the other person: “You wonder how someone can live in this country and not know the language.” *Sensitive Self* refers to an answer that shows sensitivity toward the situation, with a focus on the self: “You picture yourself in the same situation in another country.” *Sensitive Other* refers to an answer that shows insensitivity toward the situation, with a focus on the other person: “You think about how difficult day-to-day life must be for foreigners.” Responses for item E2 were coded as Insensitive, Neutral, and Sensitive. The *Insensitive* response: “You think about switching sections.” The *Neutral* response: “You hope the professor’s accent will be easier to understand with time.” The *Sensitive* response: “You want to learn about where your professor is from” Van Kampen (2000).

Figure 2 The Percentage of Sensitive Responses on the Pre- and Post-Test Surveys



Part E measures development in the area of intercultural sensitivity following a short-term study abroad program. While the percentages of responses clearly indicate an increase in sensitive responses, and a large decrease in insensitive responses, (see figures 2), a factor analysis of the questions and responses still needs to be conducted to confirm that the term “sensitivity” is actually what is being measured in the given responses.

A qualitative analysis of the data suggests that students do develop more tolerance or patience when faced with frustrating situations as a result of language barriers in the U.S. Perhaps after assuming the role of “the foreigner” in another culture and experiencing delays and difficulties when communicating, students respond to similar situations in their home countries with more empathy.

Discussion

This research builds motivational and interpersonal data to the existing literature by pointing out the value of personal connections before, as well as those gained after a study abroad experience. Students report for their reasons to study abroad, from “employers value it” to “meet people” shows that students value personal social development more than academic or career development.

In this regard, business students—noted in some studies as being more practical than their liberal arts peers—seem to have the same values, concerns, and need for support as any young adult. Students participating in this study took business courses for business majors, yet the value of their experience consistently revolves around words like *people* and *friendship*.

While it is not a surprise to discover that students’ values change after the study abroad experience, it is interesting to note how their perceptions change because of the individual *people* they meet in those cultures, not the cultures themselves. As institutions of higher education continue to provide these experiences, an understanding of the impact of friendship and personal and emotional development should be held in the same regard as academic and career development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

“I’ve learned a lot about myself while being on this trip. The Irish people seem to have a very quiet and simple life, which is the complete opposite of how I feel we live our lives.”

A student who is approached by two or three friends with the statement, “We are thinking of studying abroad this summer, do you think you would want to go?” is much more likely to participate than one whose friends are not interested. Throughout this research, one common theme has emerged: the notion of “friendship” is powerful and helps to explain student participation in study abroad.

Before a study abroad experience, college students would rather not go somewhere “by themselves”. The challenge of increasing participation in study abroad is to clearly communicate to students how the dynamic of “friendship” develops during the study abroad experience. Upon completing a study abroad experience, this study shows that students become more open to taking courses with an international focus, as well as being open to holding a job in another country. They are more likely to feel comfortable in another culture where English is not the native language, and they appreciate the social and personal benefits of studying abroad. This suggests that short-term study abroad experiences alter a student’s sense of identity to one which includes intercultural experiences and opportunities.

It should be noted that the data shows “expenses” involved with study abroad are another powerful obstacle for students. The nature of this research paper does not attempt to address economic profiles of families or attempt to suggest ways of making study abroad more affordable. This may be an opportunity for further research.

As mentioned throughout this paper, higher education administrators desiring to recruit more candidates for study abroad should focus on the role that friendship plays when students choose whether or not to study abroad, and the role that it plays in creating a rich abroad experience. By clearly and intentionally taking a two-step approach—where step one acknowledges student hesitation to travel abroad without friends, and where step two communicates to students how study abroad helps to create new friendships and relationships, administrators may see a rise in study abroad participation.

Administrators should continue to create alternative and creative ways to provide study abroad opportunities that reduce tuition and expenses for students, as cost is a variable that continued to be a concern for students both pre- and post-test. Recommendations for future studies include gathering more post-test responses from students who did not study abroad to ensure that changes to the experimental group were not the result of two months of time passing, but could be directly contributed to the study abroad intervention experience. Researchers could identify two groups of students at the beginning of a semester. The first group would be those participating in a study abroad course, and the second group would be students taking a business course at their home institution. The business course should not have an international focus, to rule out any content that could affect the results by covering material that may potentially develop or change student values toward studying abroad or values toward other cultures. Pre-tests would be administered in January, and post-tests administered at the end of the semester. Such a study could rule out the possibility that the change in values naturally takes place as a student matures, regardless of a study abroad experience.

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5) Take courses with an international focus	1	2	3	4	5
6) Read or research history of other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
7) Discover new things about myself	1	2	3	4	5

Part D: Please rank the following reasons to study abroad in order of their importance, 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important

- Employers value it
- It is fun
- It looks good on a resume
- To learn about a new culture
- To meet people
- To take a specific course offering
- To learn more about myself

Part E: Read the two scenarios below and select the response you are most likely to have.

You are waiting in line at an event behind someone who does not speak English. The cashier is trying to explain the information on the ticket, but there is an obvious language barrier. You notice other lines are moving much quicker than yours.

- A) You wonder why you always get stuck in lines behind people like this
- B) You think about how difficult day-to-day life must be for foreigners
- C) You wonder how someone can live in this country and not know how to speak English
- D) You picture yourself in the same situation in another country

On the first day of a class, your professor begins to speak in a thick accent that is difficult to understand.

- A) You hope the professor's accent will be easier to understand with time
- B) You want to learn about where your professor is from
- C) You think about switching sections

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